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ABSTRACT

The workplace research of Sylvia Scribner provides a model with which to study relationships between socially and institutionally organized practices and individual cognitive processes as well as to explore relationships between practices and processes in writing and the teaching of writing. Observations and conversations in one inner-city, multi-ethnic middle school reveal how social, cultural, and institutional structures influence assignments and peer conferences. For example, "problem-solution" essays frequently required of eighth grade students represent a variant of a genre expected in the state (California) competency requirements; however, no effort is made by teachers to connect these assignments to social practices outside school, such as writing newspaper editorials. Consequently, when asking the question "Does writing as process = writing as social practice?" it seems they are at opposite ends of an admittedly controversial dimension, the dimension of hypothesized transfer. Because evidence for the transferable power of general writing knowledge is inconclusive, it is important that educators remember the challenge of the process question about "what transfers." Perhaps transferable skills cannot be taught in any narrow direct way but will be stimulated by the demands of varying purposes and audiences. (A Process-Practice diagram is attached.) (NH)

Does Writing as Process = Writing as Social Practice? *

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Sylvia Scribner defines a social practice as

> a socially-coinstructed activity organized around some common objects.....[It] is comprised of recurrent and interrelated goal-directed actions. Participants in a practice master its knowledge and technology and acquire the mental and manual skills needed to apply them to the accomplishment of actions' goals. Navigation is a practice; so is letter-writing" (1983/1992, p. 103).

While Scribner may be best known for her research on literacy conducted with Michael Cole, the last decade of her life was devoted to research in workplaces. She studied how loaders in a dairy carry out the mental arithmetic needed for filling orders, and how new employees in the stockroom of an electronics manufacturing plant learn through on-the-job-training to use the computerized `manufacturing resource planning' system that enables companies to make parts as needed to fill orders rather than keep a large inventory always on hand.

Her work taken as a whole gives us the best available model of how to study relationships between socially and institutionally organized practices and individual cognitive processes. I will use her model to explore relationships between practices and processes in writing and the teaching of writing.

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Consider any student engaged in a writing task at a desk or computer terminal (perspective 1 in the innermost square of Figure 1). While the writer may be working--drafting or revising--absolutely alone, writing is none the less social for that fact. As Scribner once put it,

> I think of Marx's example of the lighthouse keeper on solitary watch in the beacon tower as the paragon of social labor (1990, p. 90).

What are the meanings of social for the solitary student writer? The most obvious are the proximal social aspects of the task and the ways in which it is carried out. Changing the lens on our mental camera, we can see the writer in the classsroom environment (perspective 2 in the middle square), with indications of interpersonal aspects of the seemingly solitary work. I will come back to two of them:

the assignment as given by the teacher or negotiated between teacher and student, and

teacher-student conferences or peer response groups.

But, as Scribner reminds us in her commentary on papers presented at an 1989 AERA symposium, the significance of the social does not stop with these proximal relationships, salient though they are in our thinking and actions as teachers:

> Identification of "social origins" with "interpersonal processes" radically reduces the power of the [Vygotskian] theory and its implications for the reconstruction of education....[For an individual reading a book] the content of the book, its selection by a "more capable other," the organization of a setting that supports reading activities--these are all reflections of socially organized and socially

meaningful activities. And they are all entry points for educational interventions (1990, pp. 91-92).

And so we have to change the lens once more to perspective 3 (the outermost square) in order to consider the ways in which these more micro, proximal, face-to-face activities in the classroom are themselves influenced by more macro, distal, social, cultural, and institutional structures. As examples of how these structures influence assignments and peer conferences, I draw on observations and conversations during a visit to one inner-city, multi-ethnic middle school that I'll call Bay Area Middle School.

Assignment

In Bay Area Middle School, all 8th grade students have extensive experience writing "problem-solution essays". This is one genre agreed on and coordinated in the curriculum planning done by the four members of each teaching team (social studies, language arts, math and science), who share responsibility for 100 students. In language arts the students had written a problem-solution letter to a family member about something the student would like to have changed, and a letter to a character in the novel Roll of Thunder, Hear my Cry, suggesting alternative solutions to a problem that character had faced. In science, they had suggested alternative ways to prevent oil spills in Alaska.

In structure, these assignments are a variant of a genre expected in the state competency requirements and are part of this school's writing curriculum for that reason. In content,

they reflect the school's educational philosophy expressed in its mission statement that actively guides team and departmental planning meetings: a philosophy of connecting curriculum texts to student experience, and encouraging students to consider themselves active agents in their personal lives and as citizens.

Teaching teams, generic text forms, state requirements, educational philosophies--all, Scribner would remind us, are social structures that affect the writing of each seemingly solitary student.

Peer conferences

In all three grades of Bay Area Middle School, students are grouped heterogeneously, and all the students in one class are often working on the same writing assignment--for example, the problem-solution letter the day I was visiting. This grouping and assignment structure reflects the equity aspect of the school's mission statement, and beyond that the critique of tracking in much educational reform discourse today.

Within such grouping and curriculum structures, the teacher's guidelines written out on the board for all peer response groups--in this case, pairs--can be specific to this genre. For example:

"Did the writer remind the person what the problem is,
and about the history of the problem?
Is it clear why the problem exists?
Are 2-3 possible solutions presented in the letter?..."

These guidelines contrast markedly with the more all-purpose guidelines that are often advocated:

"Tell the author what you liked best about the piece,

and where you'd like to know more..."

which fit a classroom where at any one time students are writing different individually chosen genres on individually chosen topics. My point here is less to evaluate which is the better way to guide peer responses, and more to suggest how each alternative is related to different social structures and discourses at the level of the classroom, school and beyond.

The genre-specific instruction in this middle school can be considered an example of one view of literacy: that it exists in the plural, literacies, and that instruction in written composition is instruction in one or another particular social practice. Within that view, one can imagine ways to improve instruction to bring it closer to an apprenticeship model of learning to participate in that practice.

For example, Bay Area Middle School students seem to have had limited experience, maybe none, in reading the kinds of texts they were expected to write, in this case the problem-solution essay. No connection had been made, as far as I could find out from conversations with the teachers, to one social practice outside school where this genre is common: writing newspaper editorials. In addition to collecting editorials for analysis in class, the students might even have talked to one or two

editorial writers about their craft. The unfortunate result of such limited experience with text examples, and the contextualized variations that inevitably characterize effective writing, is the need for more rigid teaching of generic structure than may be useful in the students' future writing experiences.

Or, to adopt Passmore's (1980) terms, the result treats effective writing as a more "closed" capacity than it can ever be, and avoids teaching for the most useful "open" capacity of all: the capacity for future learning--in this case, learning by finding, reading and analysing for oneself examples of whatever kind of writing one is expected to write in the future.

Why this limitation in what is otherwise such admirably thoughtful planning? From conversations within the school and with a few English educators at the California state level, two influences seem possible, both examples of social structures and practices (or their absence) in perspective 3.

At the school level, the unusually idealistic and committed faculty spends hours each week in meetings necessary for the functioning of a profoundly restructured school. During my two-day visit, for example, there was a meeting of the governing faculty council. The 8th grade teacher whose students were working in peer response groups the next day presented in spreadsheet form, which she herself had prepared, the 93-94 school budget, complete with spending options for the entire faculty to consider a few days later. Professional time needed for participation in school governance must inevitably leave less

time for curriculum planning, even for these teachers who work very long hours.

At the state level, there seems to have been no collaboration between the designers of the California literature program (which emphasizes "literature" in the reading program) and the designers of the state writing assessment. So there is no external mandate for teachers to coordinate their reading and writing programs, and no external help if they try to do it on their own.

With these observations of the writing program in one middle school as an example, we can consider the question asked in this paper's title: Does writing as process = writing as social practice? It seems to me they are at opposite ends of one important but admittedly controversial dimension: the dimension of hypothesized transfer. Smagorinsky and Smith, in their (1992) review article on "The nature of knowledge in composition and literary understanding," divide composition theorists into three groups on this dimension:

(1) those who argue for general knowledge,

(2) those who argue for task-specific knowledge, and

(3) those who argue for community-specific knowledge.

This middle school seems to fit the second focus on task-specific knowledge. But one can imagine extending its curriculum into the third category of community-specific knowledge if students examined differences, say, among editorials from newspapers in different language and cultural communities.

Process writing, on the other hand, fits Smagorinsky and Smith's first category, with beliefs about the power of general composition experience. By "process" here I do not refer to a mechanical series of five classroom activities pegged to the five days of the school week: brainstorming, drafting, conferencing, revising, publishing (which could all be included in perspective 2), but rather to internal cognitive processes (not visible in Figure 1).

These processes have been articulated in various ways. Donald Murray (19??), one of the leaders of the writing process movement, argues that five apply to any composing problem: collecting, focusing, ordering, developing, and clarifying. His list seems to have been derived from introspection into his own processes as a professional writer of poetry and expository prose (currently including weekly newspaper columns in the Boston Globe).

Other lists organize newly published textbooks for freshmen composition, presumably derived from some analysis of the thinking underlying academic writing "across the curriculum". Axelrod and Cooper (1993) list five "major kinds of discourse": remembering events, writing profiles, explaining concepts, arguing a position, and proposing solutions. Kiniry and Rose (1993) introduce students to six "critical strategies": defining, summarizing, serializing, classifying, comparing, and analysing.

As I read Smagorinky and Smith's review, evidence for the

transferable power of the kinds of general writing knowledge studied so far is inconclusive. All I want to argue here is that we not forget the challenge of the process question about "what transfers" in our devotion--which I otherwise share--to the view of writing as social practice. 1

At the end of their "practice account of literacy" learned outside of school by the Vai people in Liberia, Scribner and Cole (1981) address this challenge. After summarizing their findings of only limited, specialized literacy-related skills, they speculate about other patterns of skills under other conditions:

> Wherever technological, social, and economic conditions furnish many purposes to be served by literacy, we would expect the skill systems involved in literacy practices to become varied, complex and widely applicable....Under these conditions, the functional and general ability perspectives--which we have up to now presented as contrastive approaches--will converge in their predictions of intellectual outcomes (pp. 258-59).

Literacy learned in school, Scribner and Cole found, did have more general effects. The moral of their story may be that transferable skills cannot be taught in any narrow direct way, but will be stimulated by the demands of varying purposes and audiences.

Notes

1. After this paper was written, I read Chapter 5 of Carole Edelsky's most recent book (1991). Entitled "Literacy: Some purposeful distinctions", it is a complex analysis that includes discussion of the process/practice relationship. At the end, she writes that "Axiomatically, it [her proposed set of distinctions] discourages worrying about whether certain practices transfer to or predict others" (1991, p. 94). But I still worry, in part because I intuitively believe that I'm now using literacy

processes for social practices for which I was never taught (and wonder if that's not true for many colleagues), and therefore ask of my own education, "What transferred?"

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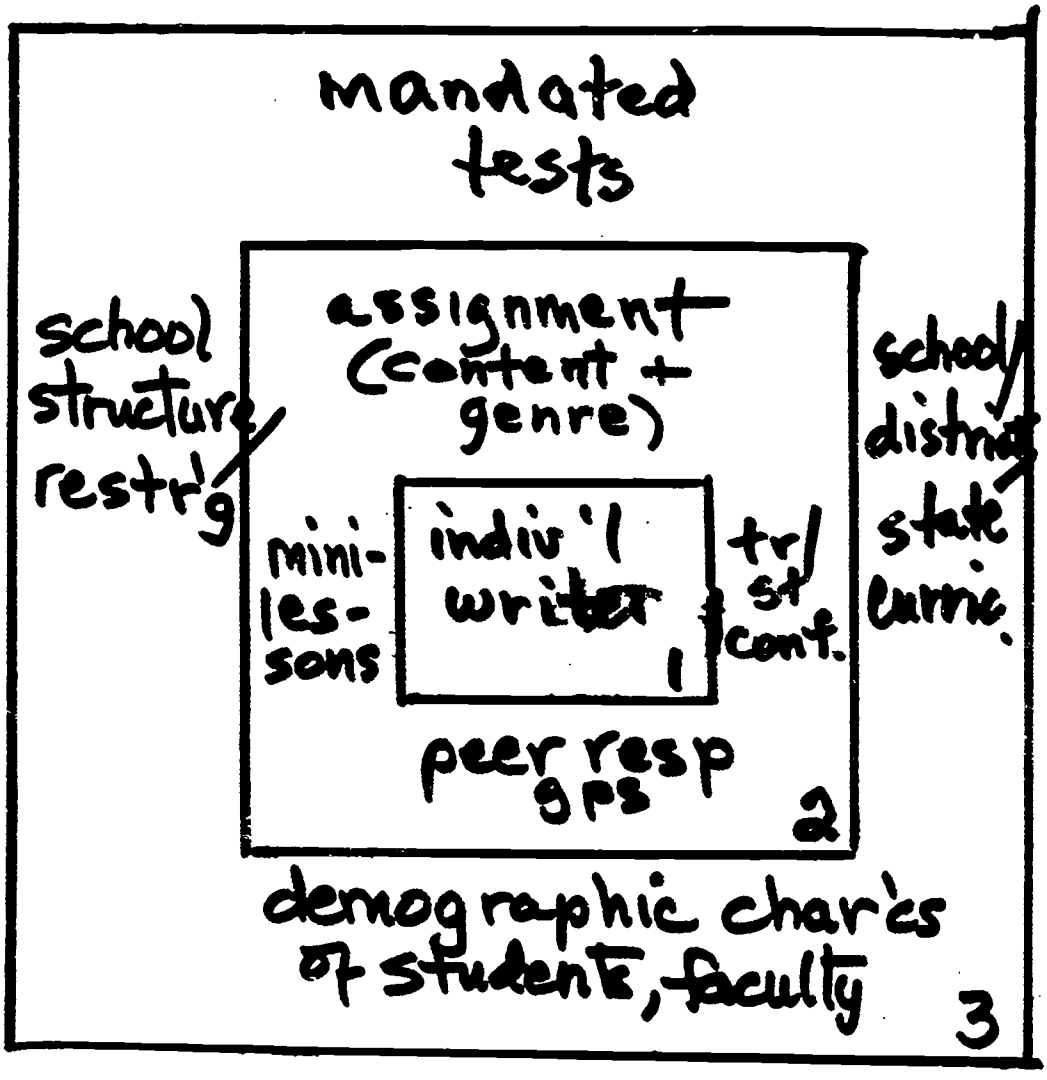

(and, not discussed here, an historical dimension to all of the above)

Fig. 1